

The Johnson Administration
Was Lyndon Baines Johnson a good President?

Historians would like to grade presidents on the merit of their programs, ideals and actions while in the White House. However, the process of analyzing the caliber of a president is often confused by the style and personality of the man in office. With the mystique surrounding "Camelot" or the Kennedy administration this analysis becomes particularly difficult. We will analyze the Kennedy administration on the following issues and try to separate mystique and reality and ask the question....Was John F. Kennedy a visionary, strong, and effective president of the United States of America.

Issue #1: Education

Good Job:

"Education is the only valid passport from poverty

Problematic:

Aid given was too specific
More Federal government control of education

Issue #2: Vietnam

Good Job:

Prompt decisive response to attack at the Gulf of Tonkin

Weak Job:

Tried to use domestic techniques on foreign problems
Escalated war even though he knew victory was questionable

Issue #3: Job Corps

Good Job:

program accepted desperate youths without education or skills

Weak Job:

had little impact
recruits were hundreds of miles away from home
created single sex camps which created other problems

Issue 4: Medicare

Good Job:

Helped the elderly population that had just increased by two times under Medicare legislation

Weak Job:

Fell short of comprehensive medical insurance that Harry Truman proposed
Adopted wasteful and inefficient reimbursement system

Issue #5: Civil Rights

Good Job:

Signed Civil Rights Act of 1964, 1965 and 1968

Weak Job:

For 20 years, from the time Johnson entered the House of Rep., he voted against every civil rights proposal he faced
Johnson felt that the race question obsessed the South and diverted it from attending to its economic and educational problems

No man wanted more ferociously to be remembered than Lyndon B. Johnson. A metamorphosis had taken place when, in 1955, as majority leader of the Senate, he suffered a serious heart attack. In the months that followed, he fell into a depression so consuming that it appeared he was grieving over his own death. "He'd just sort of lie there," one aide recalled. "You'd feel that he wasn't there at all, that there was some representation of Johnson alongside of you, something mechanical. Then one day he got up and he hollered to have somebody come up and give him a shave, and just in a matter of minutes the whole hospital started to click."

The crucial tonic, it soon became clear, was not administered by the doctors and the nurses, but by the spate of more than 4,000 letters of concern, condolence, and love he had received. They invigorated him as if they'd

been life-giving transfusions. During his recovery, Johnson's New Deal friend Jim Rowe sent him a recently published biography of Abraham Lincoln. When Lincoln, as a young man, had suffered an incapacitating depression, he had told friends that he was more than willing to die, but that he had accomplished nothing "to link his name with something that would redound to the interest of his fellow man." Would "any human being remember that he had lived?" Would anyone remember anything he had done?

Johnson now asked himself a similar set of questions. He had laid the foundation of a substantial fortune, but what purpose did that wealth serve? He had learned to manipulate the legislative machine of the Senate with a deftness without parallel in American history. But to what end? What large and lasting benefit to the people at large had issued from such an accumulation of power? When he returned to the Senate, he rededicated himself to the values that had originally drawn him into public service—the idea that government should be used to help those who needed help: people of color, the elderly, the sick, the undereducated, the ill-housed. He had returned from the crucible of his massive heart attack with a clarified purpose, a deep resolve to move his country forward on a progressive path.

On the brutal day in November 1963 when Johnson assumed the presidency, he knew exactly where he wanted to take the country in domestic affairs and he had a working idea of how to get there: "I'm going to get Kennedy's tax cut out of the Senate Finance Committee, and we're going to get this economy humming again. Then I'm going to pass Kennedy's civil-rights bill, which has been hung up too long in the Congress. And I'm going to pass it without changing a comma or a single word. After that we'll pass legislation that allows everyone anywhere in the country to vote, with all the barriers down. And that's not all. We're going to get a law that says every boy and girl in this country, no matter how poor, or the color of their skin, or the region they come from, is going to be able to get all the education they can take by loan, scholarship, or grant, right from the federal government. And I aim to pass Harry Truman's medical-insurance bill that got nowhere before."

Within two years of his taking the presidential oath, every single one of these goals had been achieved. Under Johnson's domestic leadership, Republicans and Democrats worked together to engineer the greatest advancements in civil rights since the Civil War. Together, they launched a comprehensive and progressive vision for American society that has left an enduring imprint upon the landscape of our daily lives.

At this glorious summit of achievement, no one could have conceived that the president's consummate exercise of power was drawing to a close. Yet, as the terrain shifted from the domestic policies of the Great Society to the war in Vietnam, Johnson demonstrated an epic failure of leadership that would compromise his credibility, forever scar his legacy, and nearly tear the country apart. A majority of people came to believe that he had systematically misled them. This lack of trust forced his hand. He made the decision in 1968 not to run again. When he left office, he knew that the war had split his legacy in two. The four years left to him were more bitter than sweet, as I was there to witness.

During his last months in the White House, Johnson had often spoken with me about going to Texas to work with him full-time, not only on his memoirs, but also on the establishment of his presidential library, in Austin. As my White House fellowship was concluding, however, I was looking forward to returning to Harvard, where I was scheduled to begin teaching. When I hesitated and asked if we could work out something on a part-time basis, Johnson replied with an emphatic, "No. Either you come or you don't."

On his last day in the White House, Johnson called me into the Oval Office. "I need help," he said quietly, "part-time as you wish, on weekends, during vacation, whatever you can give." This time I had no hesitation. "Of course I will," I said. "Thanks a lot," he replied, adding, "Now you take care of yourself up there at Harvard."

Don't let them get at you, for God's sake, don't let their hatred for Lyndon Johnson poison your feelings about me."

I turned to go, but he called me back to say one more thing. "It's not easy to get the help you need when you're no longer on top of the world. I know that and I won't forget what you're doing for me."

So in the months and years that followed, while beginning my teaching career at Harvard, I spent academic breaks and parts of summer vacations in Austin and at the ranch. I became part of a small team of former speechwriters, aides, and staff members assisting Johnson in the process of writing his memoirs. Happily, I was assigned to the chapters on civil rights and Congress, but we all worked together, combing through files and preparing questions for recorded conversations with the president that were designed to serve as the basis for the book.

During discussions about the Vietnam War, Johnson would invariably stiffen, shuffling through his papers before uttering a word, his voice hardening and dropping to a whisper. Unlike Harry Truman, Johnson was the type, Franklin D. Roosevelt described, who would "wear out the carpets walking up and down worrying whether they have decided something correctly." Truman, Johnson once wistfully explained to me, "never looks back and asks, 'Should I have done it? Oh! Should I have done it!' No, he just knows he made up his mind as best he could and that's that. There's no going back. I wish I had some of that quality, for there's nothing worse than going back over a decision made, retracing the steps that led to it, and imagining what it'd be like if you took another turn. It can drive you crazy." Though rarely voiced, Johnson's regrets over Vietnam were turned over in his mind every day.

By contrast, when he recounted stories about working with Congress on domestic issues, his vitality filled the room. He would rise from his desk and stride up and down, employing his masterful gifts for mimicry and storytelling while impersonating Harry Byrd, Richard Russell, Hubert Humphrey, and Everett Dirksen, rendering vivid snatches of dialogue on the budget and civil rights. These were full-blown theatrical performances, the language enhanced by his facial expressions and extravagant gestures. His spirits aroused, Johnson was able to tap once more the positive energy of the early days of his presidency.

In preliminary drafts of the two chapters I was working on, I quoted directly from the arresting stories Johnson told, hoping to capture something of his natural speaking style, his wide-ranging insights, impersonations, and bawdy humor. "God damn it, I can't say this," he instructed me after reading the pages. "It's a presidential memoir, damn it, and I've got to come out looking like a statesman, not some backwoods politician!" No amount of argument could convince him that his repertoire of stories was appropriate for a dignified memoir. Consequently, his vernacular voice and outlandish depictions, and the swiftness of his mind, were left on the cutting-room floor—only to reemerge when the Lyndon Johnson tapes, his secretly recorded private telephone conversations from the White House, were finally released to the public.

Johnson was never fully engaged in his memoirs. He repeatedly addressed the idea that history's judgment was already stacked against him: "All the historians are Harvard people. It just isn't fair. Poor old Hoover from West Branch, Iowa, had no chance with that crowd ... Nor does Lyndon Johnson from Stonewall, Texas." If such statements contained more than a habitual strain of self-pity, they also signified that he knew that his presidency had not been all he had hoped. His aversion to the memoir project also represented an antipathy to the final tying up of his life's work. Finishing his memoirs meant that his long public service, his usefulness, was done with. "There's nothing I can do about it," he said. "So I might as well give up and put my energies in the one thing they cannot take away from me—and that is my ranch."

During these years, Johnson's altered appearance was striking. Gone was the slicked, groomed hair; now, over time, it grew into long white curls over his collar. His dark presidential suit and polished oxfords had been traded in for short sleeves and work boots. An informal atmosphere prevailed in the place Lady Bird called "our heart's home." Family dinners often took place in the small kitchen or, as in so many homes in Middle America, on trays before the television in the comfortable living room.

Even a cursory inspection, however, suggested anything but a conventional middle-class existence. A massive communications network enabled Johnson instantaneously to receive and transmit information to the world at large. In that era before cell phones, Johnson's telephones floated on a special raft in the swimming pool. Phones were handy when sitting on the toilet, riding in any of his cars, or cruising on his motorboat. A three-screen television console was built into a cabinet in his bedroom. If necessary, Johnson's voice could be broadcast on 13 loudspeakers installed at strategic points on the ranch.

I would sometimes accompany Johnson on his early-morning drives to inspect his fields and give instructions to the workers. The grand disparity of power between the White House and the ranch lent an inherent pathos, even comedy, to the urgency with which Johnson conducted briefings for his ranch hands. "Now," he would begin, "I want each of you to make a solemn pledge that you will not go to bed tonight until you are sure that every steer has everything he needs. We've got a chance of producing some of the finest beef in the country if we work at it, if we dedicate ourselves to the job."

No detail was too small to warrant the label "HP"—high priority. "Get some itch medicine for the sore eye of that big brown cow in Pasture One. Start the sprinklers in Pasture Three. Fix the right wheel in the green tractor." Status reports on legislation that had been staples of Johnson's night reading in the White House were replaced by reports of how many eggs had been laid that day: "Monday, 162; Tuesday, 144 ... Thursday, 158 ... Saturday, 104." He initialed these daily memos and made further inquiries. "Only 104 on Saturday? Out of 200 hens? What do you reckon is the matter with those hens?"

When I think back over these years, my most vivid memories are the walks we took in the late afternoons after the day's work on the memoirs was done. Those walks, setting out from the ranch, traversed the actual way stations of Johnson's childhood. Less than a mile down the road was the house where he was born, painstakingly restored as a public museum. He liked to check the variety of license plates in the parking lot and track the attendance sheets to see how many people had visited that week, a gauge of how the winds of historical judgment might blow. Across the field, hardly a stone's throw from his birth house, was the cottage site where his grandfather had once lived. There, Johnson could find refuge; there, he would revel in his grandfather's vast world of cowboy tales and ancestral lore. On a rise further down the road stood the Junction School, where his formal learning had commenced.

Clustered along this road was the nucleus of his life: ranch, birth house, grandfather's cottage, school—and finally, across the road, beneath enormous pin oaks overlooking the meandering Pedernales River, the Johnson family cemetery. "Here's where my mother lies," he would say, pointing to her grave in the small burial plot. "And here's where my daddy is buried. And here is where I'm going to be, too."

Rarely was there a moment of silence on our walks, a moment not filled with the sound of Johnson's voice. He found comfort and relief in moving backward in time from his tumultuous presidency to the early years of his upward climb. He spoke with pride of his teaching days in the impoverished town of Cotulla, of the work he had done to introduce all manner of activities to his Mexican American students. He relished memories under Franklin D. Roosevelt, putting thousands of needy young people to work in the National Youth Administration building roadside parks, school gyms, and swimming pools. He returned again and again to the story of how he had brought electric power to the Hill Country, and how electricity had changed the daily lives of thousands of

farm families, letting them enjoy such modern conveniences as electric lights, refrigerators, and washing machines for the first time. He spoke of the joy he took in the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1957, which, despite the weakness of its enforcement procedures, opened the door to the far larger achievements of the 89th Congress during his first 18 months as president.

“Those were the days when we really got something done,” he said, “the days when my dream of making life better for more people than even FDR truly seemed possible. Think of how far we might have reached if things had gone differently.” He sucked in a deep breath, shook his head, and exhaled, his expression revealing a deep and unsettling well of sadness.

Returning that night to my room at the ranch, making notes on what he had said, I asked myself a question I would ask many times in the years to follow: Why was he telling me all these things? Why was he allowing me to see his vulnerability and sorrow? Perhaps it was because I was a young woman and aspired to become a historian, two constituencies he badly wanted to reach, to persuade, to shape, and to inspire. Perhaps, to a lesser extent, it was because I possessed an Ivy League pedigree, which he both held in contempt and coveted. Or maybe it was simply that I listened with sleepless intensity as he strove to come to terms with the meaning of his life.

For the more we talked, the more it seemed to me that he believed his life was drawing to a close. Indeed, I later found out that he had commissioned an actuarial table while still in the White House which statistically predicted, based on his family history of heart failure, that he would likely die at 64. Only a little more than a year into his retirement, in the spring of 1970, severe chest pains sent him to Brooke Army Medical Center, in San Antonio, where he was diagnosed with angina. He embarked on a strict regime of diet and exercise, but it was not long before he resumed eating rich foods, drinking Cutty Sark, and chain smoking. “I’m an old man, so what’s the difference?” he said. “I don’t want to linger the way Eisenhower did. When I go, I want to go fast.”

In April of 1972, Johnson suffered a second massive heart attack while staying at the Virginia home of his daughter, Lynda. Against doctor’s orders, he insisted on returning to Texas to recuperate. Reprising his father’s dying wish, he wanted to return to a place where “people know when you’re sick and care when you die.” Though he managed to survive this second near-fatal heart attack, his remaining time was filled with pain. Mornings would begin fairly well, but by afternoons, he confided to friends, he often experienced “a series of sharp, jolting pains in the chest that left him scared and breathless.” A portable oxygen tank beside his bed provided only temporary relief.

Johnson was scheduled to speak at a civil-rights symposium at the LBJ Library on December 11, 1972. All the leaders of the civil-rights community would be present: Roy Wilkins, Clarence Mitchell, Hubert Humphrey, Julian Bond, Barbara Jordan, Vernon Jordan, and former Chief Justice Earl Warren, among many others. On the Sunday night before the symposium’s opening, however, a treacherous ice storm descended on Austin. It was unclear if the event would even proceed. “So cold and icy was it,” Library Director Harry Middleton recalled, “that we got word that the plane carrying many of the participants from Washington couldn’t land at the Austin airport, and they would have to come here by bus.”

“Lyndon had been quite sick the night before and up most of the night,” Lady Bird remembered. “The doctor insisted that he absolutely, positively could not go.” Nevertheless, wearing “a dark-blue presidential suit” and “flawlessly polished oxfords,” he headed out over the icy roads on the 70-mile trek to Austin. Though he had given up driving in recent months, he became so agitated by the driver’s slow pace that he took the wheel himself.

Those who watched the former president ascend the steps to the stage knew that determination alone drove him. He struggled noticeably to reach the lectern. The pains in his chest were such that he paused to place a nitroglycerine tablet in his mouth. If this effort was to cost him his life, so be it. He spoke haltingly, acknowledging that he no longer spoke in public “very often” or for “very long,” but, he emphasized, there were now things that he wanted to say.

“Of all the records that are housed in this library, 31 million papers over a 40-year period of public life,” he began, the record relating to civil rights “holds the most of myself within it, and holds for me the most intimate meanings.” While admitting that civil rights had not always been his priority, he had come to believe that “the essence of government” lay in ensuring “the dignity and innate integrity of life for every individual”—“regardless of color, creed, ancestry, sex, or age.”

Continuing, Johnson insisted, “I don’t want this symposium to come here and spend two days talking about what we have done; the progress has been much too small. We haven’t done nearly enough. I’m kind of ashamed of myself that I had six years and couldn’t do more than I did.”

The plight of being “black in a white society,” he argued, remained the chief unaddressed problem of our nation. “Until we address unequal history, we cannot overcome unequal opportunity.” Until blacks “stand on level and equal ground,” we cannot rest. It must be our goal “to assure that all Americans play by the same rules and all Americans play against the same odds.”

“And if our efforts continue,” he concluded, “and if our will is strong, and if our hearts are right, and if courage remains our constant companion, then, my fellow Americans, I am confident we shall overcome.”

Five weeks after this address, Johnson suffered a fatal heart attack. The man who needed to be surrounded by people all his life was alone. At 3:50 p.m., he called the ranch switchboard for the Secret Service. By the time they reached his bedroom, Lyndon B. Johnson was dead. As he had long foretold, he was 64 years old. Three days later, he was buried in the family cemetery, in the sheltering shade of the massive oak trees.

This keynote address was Lyndon B. Johnson’s last public statement. By going to the symposium, Lady Bird later said, “he knew what he was spending, and had a right to decide how to spend it.” The choice he made that day represented his hope that history would recall the time when he had been willing to risk everything for civil rights, to push in all the chips, the entire capital of his presidency. “If I am ever to be remembered,” Johnson told me, “it will be for civil rights.”

-Doris Kearns Goodwin’s forthcoming book [Leadership: In Turbulent Times](#).